

Toronto's Little Portugal A Neighbourhood in Transition

Carlos Teixeira

1. Little Portugal: A Cultural Enclave

Portuguese immigration to Toronto began in the early 1950s, and peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As of the 2001 Canadian Census, 357,690 Portuguese lived in Canada (total ethnic origin). The Toronto Census Metropolitan Area is home to the largest concentration of Portuguese (171,545) in the country. The majority of this group (96,815) lives in the City of Toronto, of which 12,075 reside in Little Portugal, the historical core of Portuguese settlement in Toronto.

Little Portugal is located in the downtown west end of Toronto. In this neighbourhood, Portuguese immigrants have created an institutionally complete community that is also one of the most visible ethnic neighbourhoods in Toronto. This neighbourhood today contains most of the community's social, cultural, commercial, and religious institutions.

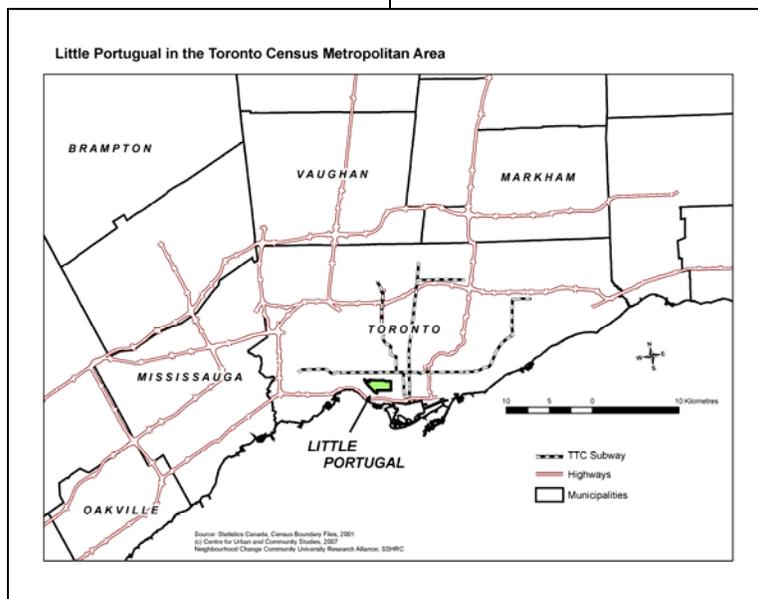
Evidence from census data reveals that the Portuguese community in Toronto

has expanded since the 1960s and 1970s, and that two major areas of new settlement have emerged. The first is northwest of Little Portugal in the traditional immigrant corridor, where the Portuguese are replacing the Italians. The second is in the western suburbs, in particular, Mississauga and Brampton. Nevertheless, most of the community's social, cultural, commercial, and religious institutions remain in Little Portugal.

Little Portugal is, however, a neighbourhood in transition, because of three major trends:

- the movement of many Portuguese from Toronto's downtown to the suburbs;
- the arrival of urban professionals, who seek to buy older houses close to the downtown core;
- the arrival of immigrants and refugees from the Portuguese diaspora (including Brazil and Portugal's former African colonies).

These processes, together with the out-movement of economically mobile



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Portuguese residents and the continued presence of an aging first generation, may affect social cohesion in the neighbourhood and the viability of the existing Portuguese commercial and institutional infrastructure.

2. Talking to the community

In summer 2006, the author conducted informal interviews with 20 Portuguese and 20 non-Portuguese residents of the area. Forty-two people also participated in six focus groups. Of these people, 13 were Portuguese-speaking with roots in Portugal, 14 were Portuguese speakers from the former Portuguese colonies (Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde Islands), and 15 were non-Portuguese residents of Little Portugal or people who lived elsewhere but work in the area.

Of the Portuguese who participated in the interviews and focus groups, 33 were first- or second-generation immigrants (20 interviewees and 13 participants from the focus groups).

In general, all the Portuguese respondents in this study agreed that Little Portugal is a neighbourhood in transition. However, there was little agreement about the degree of this change or the main forces at play in the neighbourhood. The comments reveal that the forces currently shaping the neighbourhood are diverse and complex. It is hard to predict the effect of changes – both internal and external to the Portuguese group – on the neighbourhood or the likely characteristics of this area in the future.

3. Who Moves Out and Why?

Respondents identified three main groups leaving the area, with each group doing so for different reasons.

The first group is made up of Portuguese in their 40s or 50s, most of whom are homeowners in Little Portugal. This is a group with assets and financial stability. This group aspires to move to the suburbs to improve

their housing conditions; most were looking for a single detached home in a better neighbourhood to raise their children. For some of them, this move represents upward social mobility and status. One respondent described his perspective:

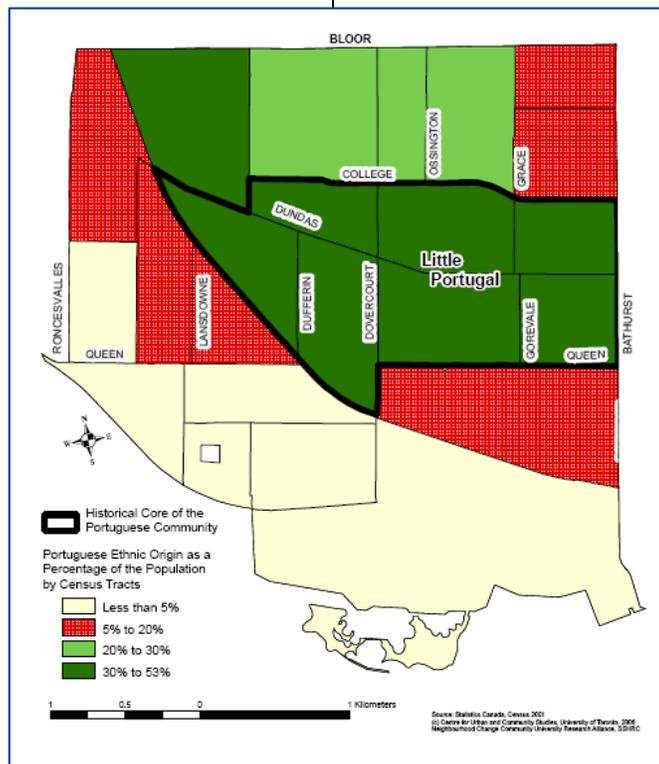
As a construction builder I see where they are going. A few years ago a lot of Portuguese went to Mississauga....but the developable land is gone there. They started going to Brampton and Milton because houses are 40 to 50 thousand dollars less expensive.

Today, new housing developments are taking place in Oakville, King City, Maple, Caledon, Cambridge, Newmarket, Woodbridge, Barrie, Bradford, Orangeville...and the Portuguese are dispersing all over in search of new housing... Today everybody has a car... and the houses in the 905 area are cheaper and with more green spaces. Also, a lot of those Portuguese that live in the 905 area work in the construction business and now construction is concentrated in the 519 and 705 areas. Thus, it is easier for them to commute to work where new housing

developments are taking place. This explains why we see more and more Portuguese dispersing and buying in the suburbs of Toronto.

The second group is composed of well-off (some retired) Portuguese seniors, who have paid off their mortgages, and who move in order to join their children, who are already established in the suburbs. Most respondents agree that the likelihood of this group of seniors, and particularly women, feeling isolated once they settled in the suburbs is high. Some, after a few years in the suburbs, return to Little Portugal, the only neighbourhood in which they feel comfortable.

The third group is made up of seniors, retired on fixed incomes, who live in a more constrained housing market, either because they do not own a dwelling and



cannot afford high rents, or because they own their own home, but cannot keep up with the maintenance costs of their dwellings, including increasing property taxes. As one respondent put it:

People who are older can't maintain a three-storey Victorian house. Because of their health and age, they are not able to do the repairs needed in their homes... and the high property taxes ...have gone through the roof... Portuguese, like Italians, ...like to hold on to their houses for as long as they can...usually the move is due to health reasons... Unfortunately, we don't have enough seniors' housing in our community to accommodate these people...in a secure and comfortable place in an atmosphere where they would feel comfortable...the new trend will be moving to a retirement nursing home or long-term care...they have no choice.

4. Who Moves In and Why?

Portuguese respondents agree that Little Portugal has, in the last two decades or so, been changed by the arrival of different groups of people interested in buying housing in Toronto's downtown.

One group is made up of urban professional Canadians – white-collar workers – who are gradually discovering this neighbourhood. Many members of this demographic group are disenchanted with the suburbs, and see advantages in living and working in downtown Toronto. The location of Little Portugal close to Toronto's Central Business District is an important influence on their decisions to move into Little Portugal.

The other factor, and probably one of the most important ones, attracting them to the neighbourhood is the nature of the existing housing stock – old Victorian-era or early 20th century houses, often large and well preserved. All these factors played a major role in their decision to select Little Portugal – until recently, a comparatively ungentrified neighbourhood – as their place of residence in Toronto.

5. Who Stays and Why?

Most of the Portuguese who have decided to stay in Little Portugal are first-generation (that is, born in Por-

tugal) blue-collar workers, with low levels of education and little knowledge of the English language. This group is the least assimilated of all Portuguese, and a population that is aging. Many have already retired. Most started by renting in the area, and then bought their own homes.

When the Portuguese started buying houses in the 1950s and 1960s, housing was inexpensive, and with a small down payment, one could become a homeowner in Toronto. Many of them renovated their houses, often subdividing the house into rental flats to earn income to pay their mortgages off. They finished the basement or added more rooms to the house to accommodate the needs of their families. There are even several cases of successful immigrants who speculated in the housing market of the 1950 and 1960s by buying other housing in the neighbourhood and renting it to new Portuguese immigrants arriving in the city. Not surprisingly, the Portuguese are today one of the immigrant groups with the highest levels of homeownership in Toronto. Some of these established homeowners do not want to leave their houses that they renovated themselves and where their children were born.

This group seems to be resisting gentrification. They will sell their houses only if they want to or are forced to because of their age or health. Otherwise, they will do what they can to keep their houses in Little Portugal; a neighbourhood in which they feel at home. Here is one respondent's story:

I opened my first business in 1969 in Kensington Market. At the time this was the core of the Portuguese businesses in Toronto. Everybody used to go to the market to do their shopping. Gradually we left the area and went to Dundas and College....we [Portuguese] are like the birds...when one bird goes, all the others follow... My two daughters; when they married, they left the area and bought in North York and Etobicoke, but I stayed. My daughters are always asking, "Daddy, sell your house and join us." My answer is no... I am used to life in Little Portugal close to everything... Portuguese business, churches, clubs...and public transportation. Also... I want to be independent... Thus, it is in Little Portugal... that I will die.

On the move

“A few years ago a lot of Portuguese went to Mississauga....but the developable land is gone there... Today, new housing developments are taking place in Oakville, King City, Maple, Caledon, Cambridge, Newmarket, Woodbridge, Barrie, Bradford, Orangeville... and the Portuguese are dispersing all over in search of new housing.”

6. Negative Impacts of Gentrification

Among the Portuguese respondents interviewed, the highest proportion (77.4% of respondents) considered that the most important negative impact of gentrification in the area is the loss of affordable housing in Little Portugal. The second most frequently mentioned negative effect was displacement through rent or price increases (58.6%) and the third was speculative property price increases (48.4%). Also important, but to a lesser degree than the previous three, were commercial and industrial displacement (38.7%) and community resentment and conflict (38.7%) due to gentrification.

Loss of Affordable Housing

Two related negative impacts of gentrification are already visible in the area – high rents and high housing prices – which are making this area unaffordable for low-income people, including new immigrants arriving in Toronto. As one respondent put it: “The housing prices are increasing almost every day and a lot of Portuguese who own houses in Little Portugal are selling the ones they own here and are moving to areas where they can buy brand new homes.”

In general, respondents agreed that housing prices in the area had skyrocketed in the last few years and they usually blamed urban professionals and real estate speculators for these increases (both in the homeownership and in the rental market). Both groups buy up the best houses in the neighbourhood – those with a good potential for resale (after some cosmetic renovations) or those that can be rented to newcomers to the area.

In this process, low-income people, including new immigrants, face barriers to finding affordable housing in the area. Some long-time renters are leaving their apartments because they cannot afford the rising rents. Portuguese respondents agreed that Little Portugal is still an affordable neighbourhood, but they question how much longer this will be the case.

Respondents pointed out that the majority of gentrifiers in Little Portugal are still living on the periphery of the neighbourhood. But, for most of our respondents, the arrival of urban gentrifiers in greater numbers into the heart of Little Portugal is just a question of time. Given the gentrification of Little Italy (to the north) and Queen Street West (to the south), it seems Little Portugal will be next.

Some respondents noted that every time a Portuguese sells a house in the area, the house is seldom bought by a Portuguese family, but more often by gentrifiers, speculators, or members of other immigrant groups. Thus, the number of Portuguese homeowners in

the area is decreasing over time and the stock of affordable rental units is dwindling. Respondents also agree that with the departure of the first-generation Portuguese from the area, housing opportunities for middle- and lower-income families will also decrease.

High Property Taxes and Housing Maintenance Costs

Although most first-generation Portuguese are homeowners and have paid off the houses they live in, these seniors face many challenges. Portuguese seniors are, as one respondent put it, “land-rich and cash-poor.” They worked very hard all their lives to buy a house. However, some never attained the hoped-for financial independence and now own houses worth of half a million dollars or more on which they must pay high property taxes and high maintenance costs.

Houses are selling for a very good price...but what is the point...most of the first generation Portuguese don't want to move...they want to die where they spent most of their lives...here in Little Portugal. What's the point of selling for good bucks and going to the suburbs...far away from the Portuguese community? That's not what they want. So...what's the point of having this huge housing prices here....who benefits? Not the Portuguese seniors.

Commercial and Industrial Displacement

Several Portuguese respondents (38.7%) showed concern about the future of Little Portugal's ethnic economy. Some strongly believe that commercial gentrification and high businesses property taxes have the potential to displace some Portuguese entrepreneurs.

Many Portuguese businesses in Little Portugal and along its main commercial artery – Dundas St. West from Bathurst Street to Lansdowne – are still doing well economically; in part because many business owners also own the buildings they occupy. However, respondents agree that the number of Portuguese businesses in the area has slightly decreased in the last decade or so.

The reasons advanced for this decline were diverse. Some argued that Portuguese businesses had followed former Portuguese residents out to the suburbs. Others contended that Portuguese entrepreneurs were retiring and not passing their businesses to their children who showed no interest in it. Still others suggested that commercial gentrification, including the arrival of other immigrant groups in the area was pushing out Portuguese entrepreneurs, particularly those who rented their premises, because they could not afford to compete to pay the high rents and high businesses taxes. It seems

that the slight decrease of Portuguese businesses in Little Portugal may be due to a combination of forces both internal and external to the Portuguese group.

Community Conflict

More than one-third of Portuguese respondents (38.7%) mentioned community resentment and conflict as a negative aspect of gentrification in Little Portugal. Some argued that the urban professionals form their own world (a white-collar one) while the Portuguese immigrants form another world (a blue-collar one).

As some respondents put it, the gentrifiers come to Little Portugal in search of cultural diversity, but they finish by reproducing their own cultural territory (a non-ethnic, non-Portuguese one), causing exclusion, social distance, and social tension between the original residents of the neighbourhood and the newcomers. This trend may lead to a form of ghettoization, some noted. Respondents described some instances of conflict:

Superior Sausage... is a smoke house that has existed at Dundas and Montrose since God gave them the ability to make sausages... Every Wednesday the smokestack spews forth the smoke needed for all the delicacies they produce. Apparently over the last year inspectors at every level have given them a hard time... the [non-Portuguese residents] have decided that the smoke interferes with their enjoyment of Wednesday mornings...

In June at the Portuguese Parade I was at the Trinity Bellwoods Park where we had the bands playing and a lot of other activities and a [non-Portuguese resident] complained because we were making too much noise. We have Portuguese here for 50 years and this type of party for decades... so where is the problem? ... This is the conflict we have now... we are very happy when we sell our houses for \$750,000 but we get upset when these guys come with their decibel meters, measuring the noise... two worlds it seems.

7. Positive Aspects of Gentrification

For almost two-thirds (64.5%) of the Portuguese respondents, increased property values as well as the in-

creased social mix of peoples (58.1%) in Little Portugal and the stabilization of declining areas (48.4%) are the three most positive impacts of gentrification in the neighbourhood.

Increased Property Values

Since many Portuguese residents of Little Portugal, particularly the established first generation, are homeowners, and given the escalating housing prices that define Toronto's housing market today, it is not surprising that respondents see the increase in property values as the most positive aspect of gentrification into Little Portugal. Some respondents noted that the Portuguese are the true "winners" in this "invasion" of urban professionals into Little Portugal. Some also said that the Portuguese homeowners will profit handsomely if they decide to sell their residences.

Increased Social Mix

Many Portuguese respondents valued the increased social mix of people coming into the area. According to some respondents, the arrival of urban professionals has helped some members of the Portuguese community break down the closed ethnic enclave that has characterized the Portuguese community for the last five decades.

For the Portuguese, most gentrifiers are good neighbours, people who care about the maintenance and appearance of their houses and the neighbourhood. According to some respondents, urban professionals are becoming integrated into the life of Little Portugal, as they shop in Portuguese businesses or participate in Portuguese cultural events, and they do not acknowledge the social isolation and exclusion that a few other respondents suggested. One respondent said:

We have today better integration... with people from other ethnic groups including the gentrifiers than a few years ago. Today we are an established community, so we can communicate better... A few decades ago we ghettoized ourselves, for protection I think... Today we don't need this protection.

Stabilization of Declining Areas

Some Portuguese respondents contend that the stabilization of declining areas by gentrification and the encouragement of further residential and commercial

Culture Clash

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development in some streets of Little Portugal is a positive phenomenon.

Despite the considerable work done by Portuguese homeowners over the last five decades in rehabilitating and renovating their houses, some respondents recognize that some areas, particularly those west of Dufferin Street, still need rehabilitation and investment. As some respondents noted, Little Portugal remains a vibrant, colourful, and well-preserved neighbourhood with a good housing stock, and they welcome the arrival of gentrifiers to the neighbourhood. The newcomers have money, many are politically savvy, and they know how to demand changes and ultimately beautify their houses and the neighbourhood.

Urban professionals arrive in the area and they demand changes. Some would say positive ones ... They know how to get around... how to get to the city councillors. They have the power ... plus they have the time and the knowledge. Because of their complaining, for example, one-hour parking signs [were placed] in Little Portugal's streets.... It limits the noise, the traffic... but you can get easily a ticket when visiting the family... now you think twice before you come to the Portuguese feasts/festivals.

8. Resisting Gentrification

Some respondents argued that the Portuguese, particularly the homeowners, are to a certain degree resisting gentrification in Little Portugal. This argument is based on the fact that most first-generation Portuguese in the area own their own homes and some of them get extra income from their housing by renting part of it. Thus, this group seems to be more in control of their housing future than low-income Portuguese renters in the neighbourhood.

In face of increasing property taxes and maintenance and utilities costs, many seniors cope by renting part of their houses, often informally, without written leases and contracts. This survival strategy seems to work for many Portuguese seniors as well as it did in the 1950s and 1960s, when they were trying to pay off a mortgage. Most of the renters are Portuguese-speaking immigrants, and the Portuguese language is a bridge in this informal rental market.

When my father bought a house in the early 1960s we used to have five families in one house. We paid the mortgages fast. Like my father, a lot of Portuguese still have rooms to rent... The houses are still divided into apartments and some of those who rent it pay in cash. It's easy for everybody... and it's

good for the Portuguese renters as well as for Toronto's rental housing market. A lot of new Portuguese-speaking immigrants are arriving in Toronto – whether they are from Brazil, Angola or Mozambique... and are searching for affordable housing.

Other first-generation Portuguese prefer not to rent space in their houses, often because of language problems or because they do not feel comfortable having strangers in their homes. Many first-generation Portuguese do not speak or understand English well (if at all). Others simply do not rent because they do not want the problems (potential rent arrears or property damage) that can come with renters. Since the demand for affordable rental housing in Little Portugal is likely to increase, it may be appropriate to provide more information to Portuguese seniors about the functioning of Toronto's complex rental housing market and the rights of homeowners and renters.

Respondents also noted that more needs to be done by the Portuguese community to accommodate the housing needs and preferences of the neighbourhood's aging population. They recognized that the Portuguese community, which is well established, should take a more active role by building (with or without government support) affordable senior housing for its members. There is an urgent need for more seniors' housing in which these seniors will feel at home.

9. Other Portuguese-Speaking Communities: Does Race Matter?

With regard to Portuguese-speaking immigrants from Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde Islands (all former Portuguese colonies), the question of how well they have been received in Little Portugal is controversial. Opinions differ greatly. It seems that Brazilians are more accepted than Black Africans from Angola or Mozambique. Some respondents suggest the difference might be linked to the different forms of colonization by the Portuguese on the two different continents, and to the colonial wars that often followed before these countries attained their independence.

Respondents also agreed that Angolans and Mozambicans are less visible in Little Portugal than Brazilians, and have more barriers to integrating or participating in the life of the Portuguese community. The Brazilian group has gradually become established in the Portuguese community, first by renting housing, and more recently by buying housing from Portuguese homeowners and establishing their own infrastructure (e.g., businesses, institutions, media) in Little Portugal.

The initiatives of new immigrants from the former Portuguese African colonies seem to be more limited and less visible. Their recent arrival in Canada and their immigration status (some arrived as refugees) may explain this difference. Some may also want to keep their social distance from their former colonizers. Racial tensions may also play a role. Nonetheless, Little Portugal remains a reference point for some Black Africans who come to Little Portugal in search of affordable rental housing, jobs, Portuguese businesses, and social services in their own language.

10. The Future of Little Portugal

It is undeniable that Little Portugal is continuing to lose Portuguese residents, especially first-generation immigrants. In the absence of new waves of immigration from Portugal, this well-known ethnic neighbourhood will likely decrease in importance as an institutionally complete Portuguese enclave. Indeed, this decline would be even more marked today were it not for the arrival of Portuguese-speaking immigrants from former Portuguese colonies – such as Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique – who have settled in and around Little Portugal and offset the decline of the Portuguese population in the area to some degree.

The future of Little Portugal will, however, be decided not only by those who move out, but also by those who move into the neighbourhood. The Portuguese-speaking immigrants from former Portuguese colonies have been joined by immigrants from Vietnam and China who are settling in the area because of its proximity to downtown Chinatown. However, as respondents agreed, the rising cost of housing in the area means that the days of Little Portugal as an immigrant reception area are in the past. New immigrants, much like the younger generations of Portuguese, are finding the neighbourhood too expensive. Indeed, almost all respondents agreed that gentrifiers are becoming the defining population in the neighbourhood.

This group, mainly white and affluent, is regarded with mixed feelings by the Portuguese of Little Portugal. They are valued for how they have rejuvenated the housing stock in the neighbourhood and the fact that they shop at local businesses. On the other hand, their desire to live in a multicultural neighbourhood has driven up the cost of housing in Little Portugal so that fewer Portuguese can afford to live there.

While Portuguese homeowners often benefit from healthy profits upon the sale of their homes, neighbourhood residents have few illusions about the implications of gentrification for the long-term viability of their community. Some respondents pointed to the transitions in Little Italy on College Street, where gentrification contributed to the exodus of Italians decades ago, and suggested that Little Portugal will follow the same course in the years to come.

Little Portugal is still considered the “mother” community of all Portuguese communities. When you have things like the World Cup Soccer you have a lot of Portuguese coming from the

suburbs to celebrate on Dundas St. or College St. These people are still attached sentimentally to downtown Little Portugal. But I agree that there is a lessening of the Portuguese presence in Little Portugal. What we see today is that Portuguese communities outside Toronto are also building their own infrastructure – churches, businesses, restaurants – so there is less attraction to come to Little Portugal.

A few Portuguese respondents remain optimistic about the future of Little Portugal, and suggested that like Little Italy, Little Portugal will retain its Portuguese atmosphere and continue to be a magnet for Portuguese from across the GTA. In this vision, generations living in the suburbs will continue to visit the community on weekends to shop or visit friends and relatives. A symbolic Little Portugal, some hope, will be here forever.

Seniors' dilemma

“Houses are selling for a very good price...but what is the point....most of the first generation Portuguese don't want to move...they want to die where they spent most of their lives...here in Little Portugal.”

Carlos Teixeira is a professor of Human Geography (Community, Culture and Global Studies) at the University of British Columbia Okanagan.

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Centre for Urban and Community Studies

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

455 Spadina Ave, 4th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2G8; fax 416 978-7162

urban.centre@utoronto.ca www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca

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